

## **SOCIAL MOBILIZATION AGAINST WITCH-HUNTING: AN ACCOUNT OF ASSAM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A movement has began in Assam, a state in the eastern part of India to bring back smiles to thousands of victims of the evil-practice of 'witch-hunting' in the state. The journey basically started by a septuagenarian lady with only primary education named Birubala Rabha. She started her personal drive based on her own experience to make her villagers understand about this menace defying threat to her life. 'Asom Mahila Samata Society' (AMSS), an NGO head quartered at Goalpara gave her a broad platform to fight the menace. Birubala has been able to save at least 35 lives who were given death sentences suspecting 'witch' by the locals. Her own NGO 'Mission Birubala' now has started to fight exclusively the menace in the state. SI Foundation for Media & Social Welfare, Asom (SIFMSWA) i.e the first organization in the entire north-east to recognize her cause and other organizations are also co-operating her crusade to improve the scenario. The Gauhati High Court had recently ordered the Assam government to enact separate law soon in the state to curb the menace. No doubt, this is a new ray of hope for Birubala and others hoping to eradicate this shame for 21<sup>st</sup> century's society.

**KEYWORDS:** Witch, Witch-Hunting, Evil-Practice, Birubala Rabha, AMSS, SIFMSWA

### **INTRODUCTION**

Witch-craft is a century-old belief among people in many a countries of west as well as east. In India too this belief has been prevailing since medieval period. In early-modern Europe and North America also witchcraft accusations often surfaced at times of great tension. Witch panic in England took place even during the last civil war.

When a women tries to practice traditional medicines---it is considered as an evil thing. Rural people suspect the concerned women of practicing 'witch-craft'(in place of 'traditional medicines') and many a times believing her to be the cause of all kinds of deaths, sickness and all other problems---she is killed or severally beaten by the villagers.

Men are also hunted generally associating themselves on the basis of the personal relation with the woman concerned or sometimes alone just suspecting practicing witch-craft.

However, not only just blind faith---but illiteracy, personal enmity, greediness for property etc. are also equally observed responsible for such incidents rising in the region.

### **Witch-Hunting in India**

In India, along with Assam in states like Rajasthan, Gujarat, West Bengal, Bihar, Maharastra, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha (formerly Orissa),Jharkhand, Chattishgarh, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya etc. the graveness of the problem is seen rising day by day. In the last fifteen years-- about 2,500 rural women were designated as witches and killed in the country.

Only three of the aforementioned states i.e Bihar, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand have criminalized witch-hunting so

far and of late, Assam has planned to do so. Bihar has pioneered in this regard by enacting the Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Practices Act, 1999 followed by Chattisgarh Witchcraft atrocities prevention (Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran) act, 2005 and Jharkhand with the Anti Witchcraft Act, 2011.

### **The Assam Episode**

Increasing incidents of witch-hunting in Assam have shocked the conscious quarters. About two third of the districts in the state i.e Tinisukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Darang, Odalguri, Nagaon, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong, Kamrup(Rural), Goalpara, Chirang, Baga,Kokrajhar have witnessed witch-hunting in recent (3) years. Statistics reveals that more than 116 people had to loss their lives in such incidents in the state during the last decade. Of them 66 are women. However, unofficial sources claim this number be very high including more than 300 women victims.

On the other hand, in BTAD area the districts of Chirang, Baga,Kokrajhar are also quite vulnerable in the context of this heinous crime. Particularly, Bodo people dominated Kokrajhar district often makes media headline for such incidents.

Besides, Rabha-Hasong tribe oriented Goalpara district areas along the Meghalaya border perhaps have witnessed a reasonable number of such incidents in the last decade. Instigated by local people, here in Assam even own child too misbehave and physically torture woman terming her as 'witch'. They are not ready even for a call or a 'hug' by their mother. The situation is very much pathetic.

### **Social Mobilization against Witch-Hunting in Assam**

Witch-hunting is a violation of human rights particularly in the context of women in the state. The increasing as well as alarming incidents have shocked the conscious quarters. But, hardly proper steps have been initiated except for a few undertaken by a few social workers like Birubala Rabha as well as a few voluntary organizations.

#### **Birubala Rabha**

Having personal bitter experience regarding blind faith of 'witch' in case of her eldest son, Birubala Rabha(Devi), presently a 70 years old widow from Thakurvila village in Meghalaya bordering Goalpara district in Assam started awareness drive personally in her locality about this blind faith and evil practice of witch-hunting. During an interview with this writer she said, "My eldest son has been suffering from mental problems since 1991. An ojha trated him and told that he was to be assailed by a demoness and sentenced to death. He is still alive and now in an asylum in Shillong in Meghalaya. On the basis of this experience, I have been trying my best to create awareness among the masses against such evil-practices prevailing in the society."

She formed Thakurvila Mahila Samity and worked as the secretary of the body to spread the message of empowerment in all respect among the local woman.

Later, she handled the responsibility as the secretary of greater Barjhara Mahila Samity. In 1999, she came to know about Asom Mahila Samata Society. She attended a meeting of the district project unit of the society in October, 1999 and from then onwards she started working actively with the organization. Since then, she has relentlessly been fighting against this evil besides performing other welfare activities.

She along with her colleagues has been able to save at least 35 lives till the preparation of this seminar-paper—that local people tried to kill branding them as ‘witch’. Besides, she has been successful in re-uniting many a such victims with their family-members as well as respective villagers—bringing back a touch of trust in their heart.

For this relentless fight against this evil-practice, she was nominated as a possible recipient of Noble peace prize for the year 2005. Her name was recommended by North-east Network, a Guwahati ----informed Manisha Behal, activist of the Network. She has also found mention in the Switzerland 1,000 women peace project—which surveyed 1,000 peace women for 150 countries of the world.

In 2008, she was felicitated in Mumbai by Reliance Industries Limited under their third edition of ‘Real Heros: ordinary people, extra-ordinary service’.

She was felicitated first time from the entire north-east region for her two decades long crusade against witch-hunt on November 9, 2010 in Jorhat by SI Foundation for Media & Social Welfare, Asom—a state-level voluntary body. The organization conferred Somajpran Sarbeswar Dutta Memorial Award, 2011 on her. This paper presenter feels proud to be the (4) director-in-chief of the foundation concerned. Later on October 7, 2012 she was conferred prestigious ‘Jaymati Award’ by the ‘Ladies Club’, a frontline women body of Dibrugarh.

Along with Birubala, there are some other prominent social-workers too like Usha Rabha of Dudhnoi; but Birubala’s name comes first as she is the pioneer to start the crusade.

Asom Mohila Samata Society, an NGO under the MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource & Development) and the Project Prahari scheme undertaken by Assam Police are to be named as pioneer bodies in the state to fight the menace.

#### **Asom Mohila Samata Society (Amss)**

Asom Mohila Samata Society (AMSS), a frontline women organization of the state struggling to improve the plight of the state women by eradicating the hindrances therein—has been struggling against the menace for the last one decade. The women’s body with active support from Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and ‘Project Prahari’ scheme of Assam Police have been able to rescue many a victims of this evil practice.

The organization established way back in 1996 with its base in Goalpara has been working for total uplifting of the rural women even in the field of health & hygiene, education etc. too. The frontline body has engaged itself particularly in lower Assam districts—Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri, Dhuburi etc. besides expanding its activities to other neighbouring states i.e Meghalaya, West Bengal etc. Presently, Mamoni Saikia is the Project co-ordinator of the body.

#### **Project Prahari**

The Project Prahari scheme was undertaken by Assam Police in 2001. Kula Saikia, the then DIG(P), Western Range initiated the ‘project’ in Kokrajhar to intensify drive against this menace, to campaign among village-chiefs as well as elders.—with an objective of empowering the local women. The Project Prahari scheme of the state police department has engaged itself in some particular activities to enlighten the villagers against this shameful practice. With the co-operation from the village headmen concerned, the project has successfully been implemented in more than 50 villages mostly in Goalpara district so far—with an objective of empowering the local women. Of late too, this project has been seen being implemented in other districts also particularly with an aim of creating awareness among people against this

evil practice.

### **Mission Birubala**

Mission Birubala is the brainchild of Birubala Rabha(Devi)—established on October 23, 2011—to fight the problem of witch-hunt exclusively and in a more effective way. The organization headed by Birubala Rabha, headquartered in Guwahati have been trying its best to expand its activities to all the ‘witch-hunt’ prone areas in the state. The body which is in close touch with the state government has been pressing the latter for a strong law to book and punish the ‘witch-hunt’ related culprits. The body has formed various district chapters besides forming a few units in some upper Assam colleges. Recently, the Dibrugarh chapter of the Mission organized a special programme in the Dibrugarh Book Fair, 2014 to create awareness among the masses.

### **SI Foundation for Media & Social Welfare, Asom (SIFMSWA)**

Birubala Rabha (Devi) was formally recognized by this voluntary organization headquartered in Jorhat for the first time from the entire north-eastern region by conferring the prestigious ‘Somajpran Sorbeswar Dutta Memorial Award, 2011’ for relentless crusade to eradicate the evil-practice of witch-hunting. From then onwards till date Birubala, her close aid Usha Rabha have been in close touch with the organization. In upper Assam this voluntary body have been trying to co-operate Birubala Rabha in her mission. During October 5-10, 2012 this voluntary body arranged many a programme in Dibrugarh centered on Birubala as well as her struggle against witch-hunting. During her stay there under the banner of the organization, an agreement was also made between the foundation and Mission Birubala empowering the foundation to work as the associate organization of the Mission in upper Assam. During her stay there, arrangements were done by the foundation for Birubala to address public gathering. This writer, chief of the foundation interviewed her for the first time for electronic media in Assam on October 5, 2011 on behalf of Dibrugarh Doordarshan (DD North-East). S. I. Foundation activists also helped her to have her first ever private channel interviews there through the local channels to spread the movement against the evil practice of witch hunting. These activities, no doubt helped the people –particularly of upper Assam to understand the motto of Birubala, importance of spreading her struggle among the masses.

### **Brothers, Buruj Etc**

Brothers’-a Guwahati headquartered NGO with Dibyajyoti Saikia as its Secretary General has been seen instrumental in Dergaon, Jorhat, Gohpur, Majuli etc. areas of upper Assam to fight against this evil-practice. The organization have also been helping local administrations in some witch-hunting related cases in places like Majuli, Dergaon etc. The body also have organized a few public meetings, awareness rally displaying play-cards with effective slogans, press meets etc. to create awareness in this regard.

‘Buruj’, a Dibrugarh based social body along with other activities has also started to act with an aim of eradicating this evil- faith from the society. After coming to the touch of Birubala under the aegis of SI Foundation, this voluntary body too has been seen inspired. The organization have been staging a full-fledged Assamese drama ‘Daainy’(witch) in different places of the state i.e Dibrugarh, Majuli etc. depicting a logical picture of the problem to create awareness among people against this social dilemma. The organization have also organized awareness meeting at places like Chabua etc.

....Besides, many other persons have come forward of late to fight the menace and to create awareness among the

masses regarding it. Many other organizations in different localities have also been formed to fight the evil practice and create awareness among people, which is surely a good sign for the conscious quarter in Assam. Assam Police as well as general administration too have been seen instrumental and co-operating in helping the people to fight the problem. Print as well as electronic media in Assam are also been giving importance in creating awareness among the masses regarding the menace, which can be considered as a positive step towards a peaceful society.

## CONCLUSIONS

Introducing strict law to combat the menace in the state of Assam is the need of the hour. Responding to a PIL, recently the Gauhati High Court has ordered the state government to enact relevant law at the earliest. Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi also already ordered the Assam Police officials to visit Maharashtra to study about the Maharashtra cabinet approved (however still not in force) 'Prevention & eradication of human sacrifice & other inhuman evil practices & black magic bill, 2013' and to formulate one for Assam in the same line. At the same time many a social workers like Birubala Rabha and various social organizations have been stepping forward with their movement for creating awareness among public and pressing the government to introduce a strong law against the crime, also to rehabilitate the victims of this menace. It is hoped, surely the people of Assam will be able to eradicate this menace and enjoy a society free from the evil practices.

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